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## ***Sola Scriptura*: An Inadequate Slogan for the Authority of Scripture<sup>1</sup>**

*Henk van den Belt*

On the occasion of the commemoration of the Reformation on October 31, 1917, Herman Bavinck said that the principle of the Reformation “finds expression in a three-fold confession: *Scriptura sola*, *gratia sola*, *fides sola*, Scripture alone, grace alone, and faith alone. This was not a new principle, only the old Gospel.”<sup>2</sup> Taken as shorthand for the Gospel, rediscovered in the Reformation, this well-known triad is not objectionable. Sinners can only be saved by the grace of God, who so loved the world that he gave his only Son as their Savior; they can only share in this reality by accepting that grace with the empty hand of faith; and they can only know this because these truths have been revealed in Scripture.

Almost a century after Bavinck’s pronouncement, however, the *sola*-triad has become a slogan for the Reformation as such. It is no longer applied to the rediscovery of the Gospel, but is seen as an adequate summary of whole process of spiritual and theological renewal of the church in the sixteenth century. This paper argues that in this historical sense the triad—and especially the phrase *sola scriptura*—is objectionable.

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<sup>1</sup> This article originated as a paper held in Dutch at the conference “*Sola Scriptura: Fading Standards and Irreconcilable Differences?*” at the Theological University of Kampen, June 11 and 12, 2015. Parts of this paper will also be published in an article “The Problematic Character of *Sola Scriptura*” in the planned English volume with proceedings, titled *Sola Scriptura. Biblical and Theological Perspectives on Scripture, Authority and Hermeneutics*. I want to thank Arie C. Leder warmly for translating the Dutch paper into a first English draft and for proofreading my final text.

<sup>2</sup> Herman Bavinck, “De Hervorming en ons nationale leven,” in *Ter herdenking der Hervorming, 1517–1917. Twee redevoeringen, uitgesproken in de openbare zitting van den senaat der Vrije Universiteit op 31 October 1917*, ed. H. Bavinck and H. H. Kuyper (Kampen: Kok, 1917), 7. The triad is not found in Bavinck’s *Reformed Dogmatics* nor in his other major writings.

The Reformation led to an irretrievable breach in the Western Church, codified in the Council of Trent and Lutheran and Reformed confessional statements. On the authority of Scripture Trent claimed (Fourth Session, April 1546) that the truth is contained in written books and in unwritten traditions, and that both must be accepted with equal affection of piety and reverence.<sup>3</sup> Partly in reaction to Trent's claim, Protestants declared that the Bible alone, without unwritten traditions, is the final judge, rather than the exclusive source, of all saving truth and moral rules, thereby confessing the sufficiency of Scripture, along with its necessity, authority, and perspicuity. The phrase *sola scriptura*, however, seemingly restricts the Protestant doctrine of Scripture to its sufficiency and does not even express that attribute of Scripture accurately. There is a crucial difference between the claim that Scripture is sufficient for the saving knowledge of God and the false impression that Protestants base their whole theology exclusively on Scripture.

Moreover, it is confusing to project a reaction to developments within the Roman Catholic Church into an earlier period of church history. That is, popular understanding too easily equates Trent's decisions with the much more diverse and complicated positions of medieval theology. The *sola*-triad encourages and confirms the projection of the later Roman Catholic theology upon the undivided medieval Catholic Church.

This article will offer the following: first, demonstrate that the expression *sola scriptura* has its origins in rather recent radical Lutheran sources; second, argue that this expression is inadequate to describe a Protestant, or at least, a Reformed understanding of the authority of Scripture; third, reflect on the discussion about the interpretation of Trent, and, finally, argue that it is time to abandon this typical twentieth-century formulation of the authority of Scripture.

## 1. The Historical Background of the *Sola*-Triad

The well-known *sola*-triad *sola scriptura*, *sola gratia*, *sola fide*—at the outset in the nominative *sola fides*<sup>4</sup>—became a fashionable expression in the years leading up to the 20<sup>th</sup> century commemoration of the Reformation. It is not

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<sup>3</sup> H. Denzinger and A. Schönmetzer, *Enchiridion symbolorum, definitionum et declarationum de rebus fidei et morum* (Barcelona: Herder, 1963<sup>32</sup>), 1501.

<sup>4</sup> It is not clear when exactly the nominative *sola fides* was exchanged for the ablative *sola fide*. In the earliest sources that could be traced for this article the expression is in the nominative. Later the ablative has often been emphasized for the correct understanding of the whole triad: through grace alone, through faith alone and through Scripture alone. For the correct soteriological understanding of the triad, I prefer the ablative, but for the assessment of the use of the expression it is important to realize that this is a later development.

used as a shorthand for the Reformation in the previous four hundred years. The triad is absent from the writings of the reformers and of sixteenth and seventeenth century Protestant orthodoxy even though the three expressions themselves do occur separately in the millions of pages of Latin texts.

The three-fold confession "Scripture alone, grace alone, and faith alone" is in fact not much older than one hundred years and originated in the circles of radical Lutheranism.<sup>5</sup> Theodore Engelder (1865–1949), professor at the orthodox Lutheran Missouri Synod Concordia Seminary, not only set Luther's "uncompromising *sola*—nothing else than," over against Rome, but also against "Zwingli and the other dreamers of dreams." He describes them as saying: "Our philosophy and our visions shall not and do not supplant, but only interpret Scripture. [...] But Luther would have none of it. He knew that, if it were not Scripture solely, it would not be Scripture at all."<sup>6</sup> For him the expression was a means to mark the specific Lutheran view of Scripture.

It is difficult to reconstruct the origin of the triad, but as an indication of the Reformation it appears to have emerged only in scholarship shortly before its 1917 commemoration.<sup>7</sup> Probably the appearance of the triad owes its origins in the 19<sup>th</sup> century custom of speaking about the Reformation

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<sup>5</sup> Anthony Lane already argued that the slogan *sola scriptura* did not originate in the Reformation time; he broadly connected it to the "Post-Reformation" period. In his view this slogan points to the material sufficiency of Scripture and formulated negatively "*sola Scriptura* is the statement that the church can err." A. N. S. Lane, "Sola Scriptura? Making Sense of a Post-Reformation Slogan," in D. F. Wright and Philip Satterthwaite, *A Pathway into the Holy Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 297–327, 324.

<sup>6</sup> Theodore Engelder, "The Three Principles of the Reformation: Sola Scriptura, Sola Gratia, Sola Fides," in *Four Hundred Years: Commemorative Essays on the Reformation of Dr. Martin Luther and its Blessed Results, in the Year of the Four-hundredth Anniversary of the Reformation*, ed. W. H. T. Dau (St. Louis: Concordia, 1916), 97–109, 99. See Jacob Corzine who argues that, although *sola gratia* and *sola fide* have a long history in the Lutheran tradition, Engelder was the first to use the triad, and that *sola scriptura* is an orthodox Lutheran reaction against modern understanding of Scripture. Jacob Corzine, "The Source of the Solas: On the Question of Which are the Original Solas," in *Theology is Eminently Practical: Essays in Honor of John T. Pless*, ed. Jacob Corzine and Bryan Wolfmuehler (Fort Wayne: Lutheran Legacy, 2012), 67. Engelder was not the first to use the slogan. In 1912 H. H. Walker summarizes the position of C. F. W. Walther as "two cardinal principles: (1) the only source and rule of all doctrines are the Holy Scriptures; and (2) the grace of God alone saves us through faith in Jesus Christ:— Sola Scriptura, sola gratia, sola fide," H. H. Walker, "Carl Ferdinand Wilhelm Walther, D.D. The Luther of America," *Lutheran Quarterly* 12 (1912): 358. This then, as was the case with Bavinck, appears to be standard expression.

<sup>7</sup> Research for this article focused on the use of *sola* in combination with *gratia*, *fide(s)* and *scriptura* in the following search engines: Googlebooks, Digibron, and Hathitrust. Titles were sought in WorldCat. More intensive research may deliver more information,

in terms of central ideas (*Zentraldogmen*) or principles (*Prinzipien*). It is understandable that Lutherans chose *sola fide* as keyword to describe the Reformation.<sup>8</sup> From the creation of this keyword or watchword the word *sola* began to have a life of its own. It was associated first with the doctrine of grace and then with the doctrine of Scripture.<sup>9</sup> Only by God's grace is the sinner rescued and justified by faith. How does one know this? Only through Scripture.

The expansion in usage of the *solas* to general Reformation principles, however, poses a problem: it defines the core of the Reformation from the point of later polemics against the Roman Catholic Counter-Reformation. Tridentine Roman Catholic theology can be characterized by "and" in three areas: Scripture and tradition; grace and merit; faith and works. But to characterize the historical Reformation by the *sola*-triad is anachronistic. The Reformation was not a reaction against the Council of Trent but its presupposition. Catholic theology in the Middle Ages was more nuanced than later Roman Catholicism. Defining the core of Protestantism as a reaction to later Roman Catholicism erases an appreciation of the Reformation's catholicity.

Of course, one should not oversimplify the case by turning Trent into a caricature. Trent's "and" is more nuanced than a simple threefold juxtaposition. Moreover, the council reacted to and intended to nuance the Protestant emphases on Scripture, grace, and faith; emphases that are more nuanced than the threefold *sola* expresses. It is not our purpose here to deal with all the nuances, but to argue that *sola scriptura* leads to a misunderstanding of the Reformed doctrine of Scripture.

Undoubtedly, also *sola fide* and *sola gratia* have to be nuanced, at least from a Reformed point of view. The slogan *sola fide* detached from justification can lead to the misunderstanding that detaches sanctification from justification. As Bavinck wrote: "According to the Reformation it was a living faith that justified, *fides sola* but not *solitaria*."<sup>10</sup>

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but thus far the triad was not found earlier than the 20<sup>th</sup> century commemoration of the Reformation, as exemplified by the citations from Bavinck and Engelder.

<sup>8</sup> Thus, for example, Schaff calls "sola fide" Luther's watchword. Philip Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom: The History of Creeds* (New York: Harper, 1877), 626.

<sup>9</sup> Ebeling claims that the description of *sola scriptura* as a "formal principle"—not the triad though—goes back to the beginning of the nineteenth century. Gerhard Ebeling, "'Sola Scriptura' and Tradition," in *The Word of God and Tradition: Historical Studies Interpreting the Divisions of Christianity*, trans. S. H. Hooke (London: Collins, 1968), 102–47, 117.

<sup>10</sup> Herman Bavinck, *Gereformeerde Dogmatiek*, 4 vols. (Kampen: Bos, 1895–1901), 3:523. This sentence is absent from later editions of the *Gereformeerde Dogmatiek*. He also quotes Calvin "it is faith alone that justifies; nevertheless the faith that justifies is not alone." Bavinck, *Gereformeerde Dogmatiek*, 3:546; see, idem, *Gereformeerde Dogmatiek* (Kampen:

Of course, no Protestant can object against *sola gratia*, but even this slogan can easily be misunderstood. Divine grace does not exclude human consent, but includes it. Or in the words of the Canons of Dordt: grace “does not act upon men as if they were blocks and stones and does not take away the will and its properties, or violently coerce it, but makes the will spiritually alive.”<sup>11</sup> *Sola gratia* does not kill the human will; it enlivens those who are dead in sin, but it does so without the prior consent of the will.

The *solas* as slogan exclude important nuances, but they especially misrepresent the historical Reformation as a reaction against Tridentine theology instead of a renewal of Catholicism. To claim that the historical Reformation can be characterized by the *sola*-triad implies that Trent’s position was equal to that of the medieval Catholic Church. This is only partly true, for the Reformation was intended to be a reform movement within the undivided Catholic Church. There is more continuity between aspects of medieval theology and the soteriology of the reformers than the threefold *sola* suggests.

## 2. Ways in Which *Sola Scriptura* Has Been Misunderstood

In what follows, this essay will examine three ways in which the phrase *sola scriptura* can lead to misunderstanding—in its relationship to tradition, hermeneutics, and general revelation—with a view to clarifying why this expression is problematic from the perspective of the Reformed doctrine of Scripture.

### *Scripture and Tradition*

Although the Wittenberg Reformation was consequent upon intensive study of Scripture, a formal doctrine of the authority of Scripture was not

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Kok, 1930<sup>4</sup>), 4:207. Cf. Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 4 vols., ed. John Bolt and trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003–2008), 4:222. Cf. J. Calvin, *Acta synodi Tridentinae cum antidoto* in J. Calvin, *Joannis Calvini Opera quae supersunt omnia*, ed. G. Baum, E. Cunitz and E. Reuss (Braunschweig, 1863–1900 [Calvin, CO]), 7:477. Bavinck also refers to John Calvin, *Institutes* 3.11.20.

<sup>11</sup> *Canons of Dordt* II/IV, 16. Calvin placed the concept of the liberation of the will by grace over against the Roman Catholic view of grace and free choice, where the consent of the will became a condition for grace. The point is neatly illustrated in two book titles. In response to Calvin’s *Institutes* Albertus Pighius wrote a book titled *Concerning Human Free Choice and Divine Grace* (1542). Calvin answered him under the title *The Doctrine of the Slavery and Liberation of Human Choice* not denying the liberty of the renewed will to serve God. Albertus Pighius, *De libero hominis arbitrio et divina gratia*, *Libri decem* (Cologne: Melchior Novensianus, 1542) and Joannes Calvin, *Defensio sanae et orthodoxae doctrinae de servitute et liberatione humani arbitrii contra Alberti Pighii Campensis* (Geneva: Joannes Gerardus, 1543). Calvin, CO, 6, 225–404.

the basis for Luther's Reformation; the 95 theses about indulgences emerged from a recovery of the Augustinian doctrine of grace. Only later in the Lutheran Reformation, in discussions with Johann Eck, Luther switched to an appeal to biblical authority. Originally, he sought to reform the church from within by means of a church council, thereby showing a desire to connect with the conciliarism of the Middle Ages.

In their Leipzig debate (1519) Eck accused Luther of positions that coincided with Hus, whose views had been judged unorthodox by the Council of Constance in 1415. In confirming his agreement with Hus, however, Luther also lost the possibility to appeal to the authority of a council. All that remained was Scripture: "No believing Christian can be forced to recognize any authority beyond the sacred Scripture (*non ultra sacram scripturam*), which is exclusively invested with divine right (*ius divinum*)."<sup>12</sup>

In his response to the papal excommunication in 1520, Luther said "I do not want to be famous as the one who is more learned than all, but I want, that Scripture alone reign (*solam scripturam regnare*) and that it not be interpreted according to my spirit or that of other human beings, but I want it to be understood by itself and according to its own spirit."<sup>13</sup> This phrase, understandably is often referred to as the original source of *sola scriptura*, but in the original context Scripture is not placed over against tradition, but over against the theological subtlety. The case of the Reformation should not be based on arbitrary opinions, but on divine revelation in Scripture that should be its own interpreter.

Later in Luther's life this switch to the authority of Scripture consolidated. In the Schmalkald Articles (1537), for instance, we find the formulation: "For it will not do to frame articles of faith from the works or words of the holy Fathers. [...] The Word of God shall establish articles of faith, and no one else, not even an angel."<sup>14</sup>

Broadly speaking, then, the Lutheran Reformation moves from *gratia* via *fides* to *scriptura*. Luther's appeal to Scripture is a means to protect the doctrine of grace, received through faith without works, from the power of the church.

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<sup>12</sup> *Disputatio Ioannis Eccii et Martini Lutheri Lipsiae habita* (1519), WA 2, 279: "Nec potest fidelis christianus cogi ultra sacram scripturam, que est proprie ius divinum, nisi accesserit nove et probata revelatio: immo ex iure divino."

<sup>13</sup> *Assertio omnium articulorum per Bullam Leonis X* (1520), WA 7, 98: "Nolo omnium doctior iactari, sed solam scripturam regnare, nec eam meo spiritu aut ullorum hominum interpretari, sed per seipsam et suo spiritu intelligi volo."

<sup>14</sup> *Smalcald Articles of Faith*, II.2 "Es gilt nicht, daß man aus der heiligen Väter Werk oder Wort Artikel des Glaubens macht. [...] Gottes Wort soll Artikel des Glaubens stellen und sonst niemand, auch kein Engel." *Bekenntnisschriften der evangelisch-lutherischen Kirche* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1930), 405–468, 421.



In any case, Luther does not understand Scripture separated from the tradition or the confessions of the church of all ages. The confessional tradition of the church remains important for the hermeneutic of Scripture. After all, the Reformation wants to reform the church from inside. Below in the discussion of the reinterpretation of Trent we will return to the issue of Scripture and tradition.

Because the phrase *sola scriptura* suggests a rejection of the tradition it is unsuitable as a descriptor of the Reformation's view of Scripture. Both Reformed and Lutheran reformations have deep respect for ecclesiastical traditions and confessions. *Sola scriptura* would find a better home among representatives of the Radical Reformation, even if not all would express it as crudely as Sebastian Franck (1499–1543), who wrote: "O foolish Ambrose, Augustine, Jerome and Gregory, not one of them knew the Lord, so help me God, even less were they sent by him to teach. They were, rather, apostles of the anti-Christ."<sup>15</sup>

Given the fact that the Reformation understood and interpreted Scripture in a congenial communion with the church of all ages and especially with the theology of the church fathers, the phrase "Scripture and tradition" is no problem, so long as its elements remain interconnected and as long as the ultimate authority remains with Scripture as its own interpreter. Only in that case the church and its tradition can be reformed. Tradition is the process in which Scripture is transmitted and in which the Spirit—who is Lord and gives life—enables the church to understand and practice the Word he spoke through the prophets.

### *Scripture and Hermeneutics*

It is remarkable that the Reformed tradition, more than the Lutheran, has been vulnerable to a radicalization of *sola scriptura*, as, for example, with the Anabaptists or the Radical Reformation in the sixteenth century and later Baptist movements that emerged within Reformed rather than Lutheran contexts. This possibly flows from the more formal role of the authority of Scripture in Reformed theology.

In January 1519 Zwingli starts to preach the New Testament in *lectio continua* from Matthew 1 onward. The Affair of the Sausages (1522) follows as a demonstration of Christian liberty over against the binding authority of the church and its traditions. When Zurich is confronted with the choice between for or against renewal and reform, the city council organizes a disputation between Zwingli and his opponents. For this occasion Zwingli formulates 67 articles, which open as follows: "The following 67 Articles

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<sup>15</sup> Quoted by Alister McGrath in his, *Christian Theology: An Introduction* (New York: Wiley, 2011), 141.



and opinions I, Ulrich Zwingli, confess to have preached in the honorable city of Zurich, on the ground of the Scripture which is called *theopneustos* [i.e. inspired by God], and I offer to defend them. And should I not correctly understand the said Scripture, I am ready to be instructed and corrected, but only by the Scripture.”<sup>16</sup>

In his famous sermon *On the Clarity and Certainty of the Word of God*, held for the Dominican nuns in the Cloister Oetenbach (1622), Zwingli refers to his own experience to explain this turn to Scripture: “But eventually I came to the point where led by Scripture and the Word of God I saw the need to set aside all these things and to learn the doctrine of God direct from his own Word. Then I began to ask God for light and the Scriptures became far clearer to me—even though I read nothing else—than if I had studied many commentators and expositors.”<sup>17</sup>

The Reformed Reformation from the outset places emphasis on the divine inspiration of Scripture (1 Tim. 3:16). Zwingli moves from *scriptura* through *fides*—as a proper understanding of Christian freedom—to *gratia*. Simplified one could say that Zwingli rediscovered the doctrines of grace by taking his starting point in Scripture, whereas Luther discovered the sole authority of Scripture by taking his starting point in the doctrines of grace. If the Reformation historically can be characterized by the phrase *sola scriptura*, this is more true of the Swiss than of the German Reformation. In that sense the radical Lutheran origin of the phrase is remarkable.

This Reformed approach to Scripture, however, has been corrected and nuanced from the beginning, especially in reaction to the early Radical Reformation. The discussions in Zurich about infant baptism disclose the hermeneutic problem of the Swiss Reformation’s original insistence upon *sola scriptura*. With some justification, Zwingli’s more radical students appealed to his promise that he was ready to be corrected, only by Scripture.

Felix Manz (c. 1498–1527), in preparation for a new disputation on the pace of the local reformation and on infant baptism, addresses Zurich’s city council with the claim that Zwingli and his colleagues know better than anyone else that Christ and the apostles never taught the baptism of children. “I want to deal only on the basis of holy Scripture and with the question whether the baptism of pure, young, newborn children, who have no notion of baptism, was practiced by the apostles on the command

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<sup>16</sup> Eberhard Busch, “Zwingli’s Thesen von 1523,” in *Reformierte Bekenntnisschriften* 1/1 (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 2002), 68. The translation is from Philip Schaff, *Credentials of Christendom*, 363.

<sup>17</sup> Emil Egli et al., eds., *Huldreich Zwingli’s sämtliche Werke* [Berlin: Schwetschke, 1905–] 1:328–84. Translation from G. W. Bromiley, *Zwingli and Bullinger* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1953), 91.

of Christ. I believe, and know it too, that no man on earth can prove it."<sup>18</sup> According to Conrad Grebel, infant baptism of children is a blasphemous abomination, contrary to all Scripture. He complains that the Zurich clergy have repeatedly maintained that the basis of their Reformation was Scripture alone—"that one should let Scripture speak, and that we should neither add to it nor delete anything from it. This has never been fulfilled. They have certainly presented their opinion, but have not based it on passages of Scripture."<sup>19</sup>

Zwingli publishes his *Von der Taufe, von der Wiedertaufe und von der Kindertaufe* three months after the first baptismal service in Zürich. In it he presents from Scripture the catholic understanding held by the church of all ages concerning baptism. But he can only do this from within a specific hermeneutic. Accordingly, the twin pillars of infant baptism are (1) that the children of Christian believers belong to God, and (2) the unity of the Old and New Testaments. Against his opponents he writes: "We do find baptism in [the Old Testament], and also that which is equal to our baptism today. That is, circumcision. Even as then men and women were figuratively baptized and men truly circumcised, so it is no less true today for all believers to be baptized."<sup>20</sup>

Because Scripture was the formal point of departure the Swiss or Reformed Reformation was forced to find a new biblical basis for infant baptism. This it first found in the parallel with the Old Testament sacrament of circumcision and it later developed this scriptural basis in the doctrine of the covenant.

Some conclude that this new scriptural foundation is a kind of solution of despair. The Anabaptists, together with Baptists who later emerged from Puritanism and Methodism, see infant baptism as a strange Roman Catholic relic in Protestantism, given the formal principle in the authority

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<sup>18</sup>Felix Manz, "Protest and Defense," in *The Radical Reformation*, ed. Michael G. Baylor (Cambridge/New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 96, 100. For the original, see Leonhard von Muralt, *Quellen zur Geschichte der Täufer in der Schweiz 1. Zürich* (Zürich: TVZ, 1974), 1:23–28.

<sup>19</sup>Conrad Grebel, "Letter to Thomas Müntzer," in Baylor, *Radical Reformation*, 44. For the original see T. Müntzer: *Schriften und Briefe. Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, ed. G. Franz (Gütersloh: Mohn, 1968), 443.

<sup>20</sup>Huldreich Zwingli, "Von der Taufe, von der Wiedertaufe und von der Kindertaufe," in *Huldreich Zwinglis sämtliche Werke* [CR, 91] (Leipzig: Heinsius, 1927) 4:327. See also: "Von kindertouff. Der Christen kinder sind nütz minder gottes kinder weder ire eltren, glych als wol als im alten testament. So sy nun gottes sind, wer wil inen vor dem wassertouff sin? Die bschnydung ist den alten gwesen des zeichens halb, das uns der touff ist. Wie nun die den kinden ggeben ist, also sol ouch der touff den kinden ggeben werden." Zwingli, "Von der Taufe," 333.

of Scripture. But what is in fact at stake is a hermeneutical problem. In the Reformation the Reformed catholic church uncovered an old treasure, buried in Scripture. The Reformed concept of the covenant flows from the hermeneutical decision to emphasize the unity of the Old and the New Testaments. The discovery of the covenant in Scripture—rather than a solution of despair—is a nice example of progressive revelation. It is not that the Holy Spirit adds new truth to biblically revealed doctrine, but that he leads the church, through crises, to a deeper insight of Scripture. This example of progressive revelation is based on a specific hermeneutical choice for the understanding of Scripture, a choice that stands in continuity with the confession of the Early Church that the same Spirit that anointed Jesus Christ and was sent by him to dwell in his church, had spoken through the prophets of old.

The Reformed Reformation seeks to understand Scripture within a catholic hermeneutic, in fellowship with the church of all ages. Although somewhat obscured by the official maintenance of the formal Scripture principle, this “catholic hermeneutic” is the real basis of the biblical underpinning of infant baptism in the covenantal view that baptism replaces circumcision.

Thus, it is not the phrase *sola scriptura*, but “Scripture in communion with the catholic Church” or “Scripture read according to the catholic hermeneutics” that matters. The hermeneutic rule, or the *regula fidei*, was found in the creeds of the Early Church. The later status of the Protestant confessions as summaries of biblical doctrine, as *norma normata* next to Scripture as *norma normans*, originates in this switch in the early Reformation from Scripture as the sole norm to Scripture understood according to a specific ecclesial hermeneutic. The Reformation intended to be a reform of the existing catholic church and a return to the essence of what the church of all ages had believed on the basis of Scripture. It was a rediscovery in Scripture of the doctrines of the church.

Over against the understanding of the church as an institution of power that had the formal right to decide about the true meaning of Scripture, it understood the church but as the body of Christ, the communion of saints in which Scripture alone can be properly understood and explained. The fact that this was sometimes officially denied with an appeal to “Scripture alone” in polemics does not annul the fact that in reality the appeal to Scripture differed largely from the biblicism of the Radical Reformation.

### *Scripture and General Revelation*

The phrase *sola scriptura* can also be confusing because it suggests that other sources of knowledge are excluded. Reformed orthodoxy generally left more room in the interpretation of Scripture for human reason than

Lutheran orthodoxy.<sup>21</sup> In the doctrine of the Lord's Supper Lutherans argued that the bodily presence of Christ must be believed simply because Christ said, "This is my body." For them *Christus dixit* or *Dominus dixit* meant the end of the discussion.<sup>22</sup> Against this Lutheran understanding of the real presence of Christ in the Supper, Reformed theology argued that it was unreasonable to believe the human body of Christ, ascended to heaven, is at the same time present on earth.

At the Marburg Colloquy of 1529 Luther insisted on Christ's words "This is my body" and stated "I cannot understand them in any other way than according to their literal meaning."<sup>23</sup> His opponents replied that Scripture often uses figurative and metaphorical speech. In Lutheranism this Zwinglian interpretation was seen as a concession to rationalism. Illustrative of this interpretation is the remark of Richard D. Biedermann, president of Concordia Theological Seminary, in the above-mentioned Lutheran volume with commemorative essays on the Reformation: "At Marburg Luther once more 'insisted upon blind and unquestioning submission to the Bible.' At Marburg Luther once more applied the formal principle of the Reformation—Sola Scriptura, Scripture alone."<sup>24</sup> Thus in the radical Lutheran context in which the triad originated, the expression *sola scriptura* also functions as a demarcation line against a less literal interpretation of Scripture and a Reformed appeal to sound reason in the explanation of Scripture.

The Reformed appreciation of the human intellect, illuminated by the Holy Spirit, also plays a crucial role with respect to the relationship between faith and science; take, for instance, John Calvin's comments on the fact that Saturn is larger than the moon and its contradiction to the biblical text: "Moses described in popular style what all ordinary men without training

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<sup>21</sup> Turretin, for instance, affirms the use of philosophy over against Lutheran opponents. Chapter Lxiii "Is there any use of philosophy in theology? We affirm." Francis Turretin, *Institutes of elenctic theology* (Phillipsburg: P&R, 1992–1997) 1:44. On the use of philosophy in Reformed orthodoxy see A. Goudriaan, *Reformed Orthodoxy and Philosophy, 1625–1750: Gisbertus Voetius, Petrus van Mastricht and Anthonius Driessen* (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 36–45.

<sup>22</sup> According to Abraham Calov, *dominus dixit* was the unique *principium cognoscendi* in the pure matters of faith, although this did not imply that reason did not play a role at all in his theology. Kenneth G. Appold, *Abraham Calov's Doctrine of Vocation in Its Systematic Context* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1998), 63. On the phrase in relation to Lutheran Christology and the Lutheran view of the Supper, see Theodor Mahlmann, *Das neue Dogma der lutherischen Christologie: Problem und Geschichte seiner Begründung* (Gütersloh: Mohn, 1969), 51–52, 239.

<sup>23</sup> Martin Luther, *Works*, eds. Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut T. Lehmann (St. Louis: Concordia, [1955–]), 38:37.

<sup>24</sup> R. D. Biedermann, "Luther at Marburg," in Dau, *Four Hundred Years*, 74–87, 75.

and education perceive with their ordinary senses.”<sup>25</sup> The Bible does not contain everything, and not everything within it is there to provide scientific knowledge. With respect to cosmology, the Reformed natural philosopher Isaac Beeckman (1588–1637) from Zeeland, for instance, advocated heliocentrism early in the seventeenth century.<sup>26</sup> Unfortunately the confrontation with Descartes set Reformed theology back for about a hundred years. Geocentrism became normative on the basis of a literal interpretation of the Bible. The underlying idea that God’s hand and his mouth do not contradict each other is right, but God’s mouth was too often identified with a particular exegesis of Scripture. A similar threat today is on the horizon in the form of young-earth creationism, not so much as a possible alternative paradigm, but as an exclusively normative hermeneutical perspective for orthodox Protestants because of a certain understanding of the *sola scriptura* principle, whereas in essence Reformed theology leaves room for scholarly research and science as study of God’s general revelation.

A final example of the reciprocal relationship between exegesis and general revelation can be given from the field of ethics. In Reformed theology the distinction—however complicated it may be—between the moral and the ceremonial laws is an important hermeneutical tool to deal with the remaining authority of the Old Testament texts. Reformed orthodoxy in some cases took counsel from the *lex naturalis* engraved upon the human conscience to decide which laws in the Torah were ceremonial or political and which of them or which parts of them were moral and abiding.<sup>27</sup> More than ever we are aware of the complexities of concepts such as natural order, natural theology, and natural knowledge of God. In addition, the human conscience is inseparable from its cultural formation and nurture. Nevertheless, it would be helpful in some ethical debates to recognize that biblical interpretation cannot take place independent of a general knowledge of the good, the true, and the beautiful.

The application of general revelation to the understanding of Scripture, either in science or ethics, may be a narrow and slippery path. It is tempting to interpret Scripture according to the hermeneutic *du jour* and let the spirit of the age lead rather than the Spirit of God. To avoid misinterpretations, Scripture should remain the “pair of spectacles” to properly interpret

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<sup>25</sup> John Calvin, commentary on Genesis 1:16. CO 23:22, *Calvin: Commentaries*, trans. Joseph Haroutunian (Philadelphia: Westminster John Knox, 1958), 356.

<sup>26</sup> Klaas van Berkel, *Isaac Beeckman on Matter and Motion: Mechanical Philosophy in the Making* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013); idem, “Beeckman, Isaac (1588–1637),” in *Encyclopedie Nadere Reformatie*, ed. W. J. op ‘t Hof (Utrecht: De Groot Goudriaan, 2015) 1:71–74.

<sup>27</sup> Henk van den Belt, “Spiritual and Bodily Freedom: Christian Liberty in Early Modern Reformed Theology,” *Journal of Reformed Theology* 9 (2015): 161–62.

creation.<sup>28</sup> But a proper view of creation through these glasses may also lead to a reinterpretation of Scripture if the book of God in nature begs for it. In any case, from the basic positive attitude of Reformed theology towards human reason, guided by the Holy Spirit, the phrase *sola scriptura* must be nuanced. The abolition of slavery was not a result of a Biblicist understanding of *sola scriptura*, but of the courage of Christians to interpret Scripture from a new hermeneutic perspective, by attaching more value to the implicit relativization of slavery in the New Testament than to its explicit regulation. These interpreters took this courageous step because they knew from general revelation—call it natural law or a sense of human rights—that the way in which slavery had developed in the seventeenth century—and which differed from the less severe form of slavery in ancient times—showed that it was an intrinsic evil.

Therefore, no *sola scriptura*, but Scripture as a lens through which we recognize general revelation, and, in faithful dependence upon God, to reflect in our thinking the divine thought placed in creation.

### 3. The Interpretation of Trent

Although the hermeneutical argument against *sola scriptura* and the argument from general revelation could receive further development, it is the relationship between Scripture and tradition that deserves a closer examination, for the simple reason that it has been much discussed in inter-confessional debates. Given that, we want to avoid the impression that our argument does not correctly present the position of the Council of Trent.

#### *Oberman and Lane*

The later Protestant doctrine of Scripture opposes the Tridentine understanding of the relationship between Scripture and tradition. Trent judges that oral traditions about Christ preserved in the church are authoritative for the church's teaching (*doctrina*) and practice. Therewith Trent draws a direct connection with the medieval view of Scripture and tradition. In 1963, Heiko A. Oberman suggested influential though generalizing distinction of "tradition" either refers to the instrumental vehicle in which Scripture is passed on (Tradition I), or to the oral tradition complementary to Scripture (Tradition II). Originally, the Early Church held that the apostolic teaching, as embedded in Scripture, was mediated by tradition. Beginning with Basil the Great (ca. 330–379) a development emerged which took tradition as an authoritative source, alongside Scripture.<sup>29</sup> In the Middle Ages the

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<sup>28</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes* 1.6.1.

<sup>29</sup> Heiko A. Oberman, *The Harvest of Medieval Theology: Gabriel Biel and Late Medieval Nominalism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1963), 406.



“single-source” theory intended to interpret Scripture within the community of faith while the “two-source” theory allowed for extra-biblical tradition. The Reformation hearkened back to the Early Church’s understanding of the relationship between Scripture and tradition: We receive Scripture from our predecessors in the process of handing down the Christian faith from generation to generation.

In 1975 Anthony Lane offered an important nuance to Oberman’s thesis by reflecting on the related issue of the authority of the church. He offers four different views of the relationship between Scripture and tradition. He identified the position of the Early Church (Oberman’s “Tradition I”) as the coincidence view, in which “the teaching of the church, Scripture and tradition coincide.” He called the later medieval view (Oberman’s “Tradition II”)—and the position of Trent—the supplementary view, because in this view “tradition does not just present the content of Scripture in a different form but also supplements it.”<sup>30</sup> The view of the Reformers is not a simple copy of the medieval view, according to Lane, but it gives tradition a place as handmaid of Scripture. This ancillary view he identifies with the *sola scriptura* position, although Lane acknowledges that the Reformation was not a protest against tradition as such. Still its view differed from the coincidence view, that for the acceptance of any tradition “Scripture remained, formally as well as materially, the ultimate criterion and norm.”<sup>31</sup> A final position on Scripture, the church and tradition, is the unfolding view, Lane’s name or the modern Roman Catholic view, which is “not a return from the supplementary to the coincidence view but rather an advance beyond the supplementary view [...] Catholic dogma need only be implicit in Scripture and early tradition.”<sup>32</sup>

Although I agree with Lane’s nuance of Oberman’s thesis, still he seems to suggest more continuity between later Roman Catholicism and the medieval view of tradition and Scripture than between Protestantism and the patristic view of tradition and Scripture. It is undeniable that the Protestant view of the authority of the church differed from that of their contemporary opponents. The whole Reformation was about liberating the gospel from the authority of the church. The main issue regarding the usefulness of the phrase *sola scriptura* for the Protestant doctrine of Scripture, however, is not ecclesiology, but the question whether Protestant theology can be based on Scripture alone, without any respect to the catholic and confessional

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<sup>30</sup> A. N. S. Lane, “Scripture, Tradition and Church: An Historical Survey,” *Vox Evangelica* 9 (1975): 37–55, 39–40. Cf. the clear summary of Oberman’s and Lane’s positions in Craig D. Allert, “What Are We Trying to Conserve?: Evangelicalism and *Sola Scriptura*,” *The Evangelical Quarterly* 76.4 (2004): 327–48, 332–38.

<sup>31</sup> Lane, “Scripture, Tradition and Church,” 43.

<sup>32</sup> Lane, “Scripture, Tradition and Church,” 48.



interpretation of Scripture. As we have seen, tradition, hermeneutics and general revelation are too influential to justify the use of the expression. In fact Lane strongly reinterprets *sola scriptura* when he concludes that "Protestants [do not] have to abandon the *sola scriptura* in the sense that Scripture is the sole norm, the *norma normans non normata*. Development there may be, but this development is neither normative nor irreformable."<sup>33</sup> Scripture as ultimate norm, however, is something else than the plain meaning "Scripture alone" and than the original meaning attached to the phrase by radical Lutherans.

### *Trent and Vaticanum II*

But did the Council of Trent really see tradition as a supplement to Scripture? At least during the centuries before *Vaticanum II* the Tridentine formula was generally understood as juxtaposing Scripture and unwritten traditions.

The three Protestant *solas* originated in a time when the influence and power of the Roman Catholic Church were growing and when orthodox Protestants in general felt a need to fence their position not only against theological liberalism, but also against a strong and attractive Roman Catholic alternative. As watchwords or central doctrines of the Reformation the *solas* were formulated in reaction against the ultramontanist Roman Catholicism that declared the pope infallible at *Vaticanum I* (1870). Perhaps that context should be reason enough to reconsider the use of the *solas*.

The statements of Trent regarding Scripture and tradition, however, were reinterpreted in the wake of the Second Vatican Council and consequentially the "two-source" theory received a nuanced interpretation. The key to understanding this new interpretation is the difference between the original draft of the decree: "this truth [of the Gospel] is contained partly [*partim*] in written books, partly [*partim*] in unwritten traditions";<sup>34</sup> and its final phrasing: "this truth and rule [of the Gospel] are contained in written books and [*et*] in unwritten traditions."<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Lane, "Scripture, Tradition and Church," 48. Cf. "What then is the essence of the *sola Scriptura* principle? It is that Scripture is the final authority or norm for Christian belief." Lane, "Sola Scriptura?" 323. Lane denies that the rejection of all other sources was "what was meant by *sola Scriptura*," but he does not give very specific sources for the original use of the term that might determine what was meant by it. Lane, "Sola Scriptura?" 300.

<sup>34</sup> Council of Trent, *Concilium Tridentinum diariorum, actorum, epistularum, tractatum nova collection*, ed. Societas Goerriesiana, 13 vols. (Freiberg: Herder, 1901–2001) 5:31.

<sup>35</sup> Council of Trent, *Concilium Tridentinum*, 5:91.

Of this change, Joseph R. Geiselmann writes that “Trent did not mean to define that Scripture and tradition were two separate sources standing side by side.”<sup>36</sup> He found that the Council had left the issue of the mutual relationship open, and that therefore the decree allowed for the material sufficiency of Scripture and for an understanding of tradition as Scripture’s interpretive context. Others went so far as to claim that the change implied the Council’s rejection of the two-source theory. In what undoubtedly is an overstatement, George H. Tavard claimed that the Council explicitly excluded the notion that the Gospel is partly in Scripture and partly in the traditions.<sup>37</sup>

Others, such as Heinrich Lennerz, SJ, opposed Geiselmann, even accusing him of holding the Protestant position of *sola scriptura*; the Council was a reaction against the Reformers who believed that everything is in Holy Scripture.<sup>38</sup> Part of Christ’s teaching is contained in the unwritten apostolic traditions and therefore the sufficiency of Scripture ought to be rejected by Roman Catholics.

It is not necessary to elaborate on this discussion here or to go into the details of the correct interpretation of Trent. Suffice it to say that the leading view of the relationship between Scripture and tradition after *Vaticanum II* follows some version of the one-source theory: Scripture is the most important part of tradition or revelation. Scripture, tradition, and the church

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<sup>36</sup> J. R. Geiselmann, “Scripture and Tradition in Catholic Theology,” *Theology Digest* 6 (1958): 75. Originally published as, “Das Missverständnis über das Verhältnis von Schrift und Tradition und seine Überwindung in der katholischen Theologie,” *Una Sancta* 2 (1956): 131–50. For an extensive discussion of the debate see, Matthew L. Selby, “The Relationship between Scripture and Tradition according to the Council of Trent” (unpublished M.A. thesis, University of Saint Thomas, 2013).

<sup>37</sup> George H. Tavard, *Holy Writ or Holy Church: The Crisis of the Protestant Reformation* (London: Burns & Oates, 1959), 208. See also Henri Holstein, “La Tradition d’après le Concile de Trente,” *Recherches de Science Religieuse* 47 (1959): 367–90; Henri Holstein, “Der begriff der Tradition auf dem Trienter Konzil (1951),” in *Concilium Tridentinum: Wege der Forschung*; 313, ed. R. Bäumer (Darmstadt, 1979), 254, 267, 270; and, Selby, “Relationship between Scripture and Tradition,” 19.

<sup>38</sup> Heinrich Lennerz, SJ, “Scriptura sola?” *Gregorianum* 40 (1959): 45; and, Selby, “Relationship between Scripture and Tradition,” 14; Heiko A. Oberman (“Das tridentinische Rechtfertigungsdekret im Lichte spätmittelalterlicher Theologie” (1964), *Concilium Tridentinum*, 303–6) is not certain that the participants in the council awarded this change weight. In any case, Trent placed tradition alongside Scripture in lasting significance for the doctrine of the church. J. Beumer rejects the argument that the change hides a significant change in position. See his, J. Beumer, *Die mündliche Überlieferung als Glaubensquelle: Handbuch der Dogmengeschichte 4, Das Dasein im Glauben* (Freiburg: Herder, 1962), 83–84.

are intrinsically and necessarily related in a network of interdependent authorities; tradition's role is interpretative and explicative.<sup>39</sup>

This latter view comes close to the way the relationship between Scripture and tradition functioned for many sixteenth-century Protestants. Scripture held the primacy, and the highest place of authority, but it was not to be interpreted in opposition to the *regula fidei* of the church of all ages and places. The underlying ecclesiology may have been different—the church for the Protestants was the communion of saints, not in the first place the official *magisterium*—but the sufficiency of Scripture did not imply that Scripture could be interpreted arbitrarily.

### *Sola scriptura as "Whipping Boy"*

In the meantime, however, the idea that *sola scriptura* is an adequate summary of the Reformation's position has become so commonplace that it is frequently accepted as the formal principle of the historical Reformation. And, for those who see the Reformation as a problem and the beginning of general decline, *sola scriptura* has become a useful "whipping boy."

When, on the one hand Trent's *partim ... partim* interpretation is understood to be historically inaccurate, but on the other hand *sola scriptura*—a rather unhappy early twentieth-century slogan for the Reformation view of Scripture—is still understood to be historically accurate, the Protestant view is made unnecessarily vulnerable to misinterpretation. The slogan turns the tables and seemingly makes the Protestant position more problematic in light of the historical understanding of Scripture than the Tridentine view of Scripture and tradition, which historically is the real problem, although happily Roman Catholics nowadays have found ways to cope with that.

In general, Roman Catholic scholarship acknowledges that the magisterial Reformation did not hold an anti-tradition view of Scripture. Thus, Brad Gregory writes that the Reformers "maintained the importance of many aspects of tradition, such as the writings of the church fathers or the decrees of the early ecumenical councils, in addition to scripture."<sup>40</sup> Nevertheless, this Protestant position is so problematic precisely because Gregory assumes that the Reformers held that *sola scriptura* is the sole foundation of all Protestant theology. Although traditions and church authorities are esteemed and used by the Reformers, according to Gregory, they are always rejected "wherever any of these contradicted their own interpretations of the Bible."<sup>41</sup> According

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<sup>39</sup> For a recent example, see Eduardo Echeverría, "Revelation, Faith, and Tradition: Catholic Ecumenical Dialogue," *Calvin Theological Journal* 49 (2014): 25–62, 32.

<sup>40</sup> Brad S. Gregory, *The Unintended Reformation* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012), 95. See also, Echeverría, "Revelation, Faith, and Tradition," 42.

<sup>41</sup> Gregory, *The Unintended Reformation*, 95.

to Eduardo Echeverria, Protestants are left “with the principle of private judgment as the last court of appeal in deciding matters of divine truth.”<sup>42</sup>

This representation of the Protestant position is far too individualistic for the sixteenth-century Reformation. It also overlooks the fact that the magisterial Reformation intended to reform the existing catholic churches according to the Word of God and not to start new churches from scratch with an appeal to private interpretation of Scripture. In any case, the slogan *sola scriptura* so simplifies the Protestant position that it is inadequate in present inter-confessional discussions. Even if the Protestant position would ultimately imply an appeal to private judgment, it can equally be argued that Roman Catholics also ultimately rest on their private judgment for the acceptance of the authority of tradition and church.

According to Eduardo Echeverria, Trent rejected *sola scriptura*, not only in the sense of *solo scriptura* or *nuda scriptura*, “but also the idea that Scripture is epistemologically self-sufficient for justifying dogmas such that tradition (e.g., councils, creeds, confessions, catechisms) in no analogous sense whatsoever shares in the authority of Scripture for the purpose of securing Scripture’s own authority.”<sup>43</sup> He claims that Trent leaves open three possibilities: the two-source theory of revelation, the classical view of the Middle Ages that all revelation is contained in Scripture (but that Scripture must be interpreted by the church in line with the apostolic tradition) and, the view that defines Tradition (with a capital “T”) as revelation in transmission including both the Bible and the unwritten traditions.

But this analysis turns the historical tables. The Protestant position on Scripture seems to be the second position Trent leaves open, even though the Protestant notion of the church emphasizes the community of the faithful over against the interpretative power of *magisterium* in Rome. If Trent had

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<sup>42</sup> Echeverria (“Revelation, Faith, and Tradition,” 47) cites Reinhard Hütter (“Relinquishing the Principle of Private Judgment in Matters of Divine Truth: A Protestant Theologian’s Journey into the Catholic Church,” *Nova et Vetera* 9.4 (2011): 878), who acknowledges that his assent to the Roman Catholic Church was informed by private judgment. He resolves this with John Henry Newman’s argument that converts must use their private judgment only in the first process of conversion in order to eventually supersede it. John Henry Newman, *Loss and Gain: The Story of a Convert* (London: Longmans, Green, 1906), 203. In my opinion, however, any believer continuously assents to the authority—either of the church or of Scripture—and there is no other way that they can do so than by their own private judgment. According to Herman Bavinck the Reformation understands Scripture as *autopistos*, and Rome understands the church as *autopistos*. In both cases the Spirit of God is needed to convince believers. “The deepest ground for faith, also in the case of Rome, is not Scripture or the church, but the ‘interior light.’” Bavinck, *Gereformeerde Dogmatiek*<sup>4</sup>, 4:293, 296; ET: Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 4:309, 311.

<sup>43</sup> Echeverria, “Revelation, Faith, and Tradition,” 55.

truly left this second open, then fathers at the Council simply misunderstood the Protestant claims regarding Scripture, for the Protestant view of Scripture does not imply that Scripture is epistemologically self-sufficient. Scripture contains all the truth necessary for salvation and there is no higher court to appeal to. Nevertheless, just because the Word of God is *theopneustos*, breathed by the Spirit of God, the authority of Scripture is always intertwined with the witness of the Spirit. This witness is not some individualistic, private judgement, but the resonance of the Word in the heart of the believer and in the confession of the church of all ages regarding Scripture. The *autopistia*, the self-convincing character of Scripture, is only recognized through the *testimonium Spiritus sancti*.<sup>44</sup>

Historically Trent seems to have held a notion of tradition next to Scripture, one that goes beyond the interpretation of Scripture by councils, creeds, confessions, and catechisms. If the Catholic reinterpretation of Trent's decrees is historically correct, then the Protestants rejected a council that they totally misunderstood. Misunderstandings and miscommunications from both sides may have played a role in the fierce rejection of each other's positions, but it is very unlikely that the Council so misunderstood the Reformers that they left openings for Protestant views, and that the Protestants so misunderstood Trent that they overlooked that their position was not really rejected. For the purpose of the inter-confessional debate today it is helpful that Trent can be interpreted less strictly, in line with the Second Vatican Council, but that does not erase the centuries-long understanding that Trent avows the two-source theory or supplementary view of tradition.

#### 4. Time to Say "Goodbye!"

In *Dei Verbum*, the Second Vatican Council's constitution on revelation (1965), tradition is defined as the way in which the apostolic message, committed to writing in the Scriptures of the New Testament, is handed over to the church. The apostolic preaching is "expressed in a special way in the inspired books" but is also "preserved by an unending succession of preachers until the end of time." Sixteenth-century Protestants would hardly object to the idea of a living tradition in which God through his Word "converses with the bride of His beloved Son."<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> On the *autopistia* of Scripture and the *testimonium* of the Spirit, see Henk van den Belt, *The Authority of Scripture in Reformed Theology: Truth and Trust* (Leiden: Brill, 2008) and a summarizing article, Henk van den Belt, "Scripture as the Voice of God: The Continuing Importance of *Autopistia*," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 13.4 (2011): 434–447.

<sup>45</sup> *Dei Verbum*, The Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, 8. For the English translation, see e.g., George T. Montague, *Understanding the Bible: A Basic Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* (New York: Paulist, 1997), 216–17.

Even *Dei Verbum*'s claim that the canon is known through the tradition of the church and that the Scriptures are better understood through it, would not necessarily be objectionable to the Reformers. But that claim would have to be paired with the understanding that the authority of the canon does not depend on the authority of the church, but vice versa, and that the *magisterium* of the institutional church may not rule out interpretations that have the potential to reform the church's doctrines or practices. Interestingly, *Dei Verbum* expressly rejects *sola scriptura*. It holds to a close connection between Scripture, the Word of God consigned to writing under the inspiration of the Spirit, and tradition, which hands on the Word of God to the apostles' successors in its full purity. "Consequently it is not from Sacred Scripture alone [*non per solam Scripturam*] that the Church draws her certainty about everything which has been revealed. Therefore both sacred tradition and Sacred Scripture are to be accepted and venerated with the same sense of loyalty and reverence."<sup>46</sup> The last part of this sentence echoes the formulation of Trent, but the definition of tradition here differs largely from the way Trent has been understood before.

It is fine that Roman Catholics can finally interpret Trent in a modified way, but it is not helpful for inter-confessional discussions if the Protestant position is still summarized by the slogan *sola scriptura*, a position that is even explicitly rejected by *Vaticanum II*. Sometimes *sola scriptura* is modified so that it becomes shorthand for the sufficiency of Scripture as it is formulated in the Protestant confessional statements, such as the *Belgic Confession*, which teaches that "Scripture fully contains the will of God and that all that man must believe in order to be saved is sufficiently taught therein" (article 7) or the *Westminster Confession* which teaches that "the whole counsel of God concerning all things necessary for His own glory, man's salvation, faith and life, is either expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture" (I. vi). As far as I know, however, none of the Protestant confessions use the shorthand *sola scriptura*, or expressions containing it, to explain what they believe regarding the *sufficientia* of Scripture.

The expression *sola scriptura* one-sidedly emphasizes only one of the four defining attributes of Scripture, namely its sufficiency, and does not convey the nuanced way in which this is related to its necessity, clarity, and authority. Whereas Reformed confessional theology leaves room for doctrines "deduced from Scripture," it was exactly this point that was criticized by the Lutherans who first introduced *sola scriptura* at the beginning of the

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<sup>46</sup> *Dei Verbum*, 9; Montague, *Understanding the Bible*, 218. According to G. C. Berkouwer, this does not imply that traditions are an independent source of revelation. G. C. Berkouwer, *Nabetrachting op het Concilie* (Kampen: Kok, 1968), 116. Cf. Echeverria, "Revelation, Faith, and Tradition," 50.



twentieth century. The slogan also easily obscures the fact that Scripture sometimes needs explanation, or as the *Westminster Confession* says “All things in Scripture are not alike plain in themselves, nor alike clear unto all” (I. vii). Still everything necessary to be known is stated clearly enough that anyone who uses the means will sufficiently understand them.

In other words, *sola scriptura* is only acceptable if it means that Scripture is clear and contains enough for salvation and for the conduct after salvation. This does not, however, exclude the role of tradition for the transmission of Scripture, the role of general revelation next to Scripture, and the role of hermeneutics for the correct interpretation of Scripture.

Sometimes the expression *sola scriptura* is qualified by explaining that it does not stand for *nuda scriptura* or *solo scriptura*. Thus the American ecumenical initiative “Evangelicals and Catholics Together” declares their statement on the authority of Scripture, that from the evangelical side the need is recognized

to address the widespread misunderstanding in our community that *sola scriptura* (Scripture alone) means *nuda scriptura* (literally, Scripture unclothed; i.e., denuded of and abstracted from its churchly context). The phrase *sola scriptura* refers to the primacy and sufficiency of Scripture as the theological norm—the only infallible rule of faith and practice—over all tradition rather than the mere rejection of tradition itself. The isolation of Scripture study from the believing community of faith (*nuda scriptura*) disregards the Holy Spirit’s work in guiding the witness of the people of God to scriptural truths, and leaves the interpretation of that truth vulnerable to unfettered subjectivism.”<sup>47</sup>

I agree with all the nuances, but why would such a nuanced position be equated with *sola scriptura* when that expression is open to misunderstanding. The only reason I can think of for the maintenance of a shorthand that means something different than its literal translation or than its meaning in the original intention of those who introduced it, is that the shorthand has not only become a part of a collective memory, but also that it functions as a mark of orthodoxy.

Furthermore, just as the expression *sola scriptura* can be found incidentally in the writings of the Reformers—John Calvin for instance states that “the true rule of righteousness is to be sought from Scripture alone [*ex sola scriptura*]”<sup>48</sup>—the same is true of the here rejected *nuda scriptura*. For example, John Calvin admits that the Incarnation is a divine mystery beyond

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<sup>47</sup> Charles Colson and Richard John Neuhaus, “Your Word is Truth Statement” in Charles Colson and Richard John Neuhaus, *Your Word is Truth: A Project of Evangelicals and Catholics Together* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 4.

<sup>48</sup> Calvin, *Institutes* 3.17.8; Calvin, *Opera Selecta*, 3:261.



the understanding of the human mind, but over against his opponents—in this case skeptical humanists—he admits that “we depend upon Scripture alone [*ex nudis scripturis pendeamus*] for convincing people about such great matters.”<sup>49</sup> It is noteworthy that Calvin here does not mean that “Scripture alone” is his formal theological principle, but that in the discussion with his opponents he has nothing else than Scripture itself, as vulnerable as it may seem to be.

My main point is not that the expression *sola scriptura* has never been used, although it is comparatively rare in the millions of pages of Protestant Latin texts, but that it leads to misunderstanding if it is used to characterize the historical Reformation of the church. Doing so obscures the continuity between the Protestant view and the tradition of the church regarding the relationship between Scripture and tradition as the way in which Scripture has been transmitted within the ecclesial context.

Orthodox Protestantism has made itself unnecessarily vulnerable during the last century because of the sloganization of *sola scriptura*, as evidenced by the repeated attempts to define precisely what is and what is not meant by it. This suggests that it is time to place this problematic phrase, along with the other *solas*, in the trophy case of church history, there to represent a typical polemical manner in which 20<sup>th</sup> century Protestants attempted to define the Reformation.

We are, of course, grateful to the anonymous author of the ablative. By dropping the “s” from *fides* the implication remains that we are saved only by faith, and—as *fide* instead of *fides* implies that the three expressions ought to be read in the ablative—we are also saved by grace alone and we know this through Scripture alone. The problem remains, however, that this use of the *sola* triad easily results in severing it from its connection to soteriology and that *sola scriptura* especially becomes a formal Biblicist principle.

Is there an alternative to the *sola*-triad? If I had to replace them I would suggest: *gratia prima, fides prima en scriptura prima*. But I can do without slogans.<sup>50</sup> The core of the Reformation debate was about the right understanding of the relationship between grace and merit. Even better, it was about grace and freedom, about the right relationship of faith to works and the right relationship between Scripture and tradition. The word *sola* pulls this relationship apart in advance.

The word *prima* better expresses that grace, faith, and Scripture are irreducible points of departure, the *principia per se nota*, beyond which a Christian cannot go. Scripture is received by means of the tradition, but its

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<sup>49</sup> Calvin, CO, 8:16; cf. John Calvin, *Concerning Scandals*, trans. John W. Fraser (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 18.

<sup>50</sup> The Dutch uses an untranslatable pun: “Maar zonder slogans is het mij ook *prima*.”

primacy lends it authority to reform and renew tradition; tradition may not do so with Scripture. Scripture may not be severed from hermeneutics, but it is always a question of which hermeneutic and what is determinative for it. The primacy of Scripture means searching for “scriptural principles in order to explain Scripture.”<sup>51</sup> Scripture cannot be separated from God’s general revelation in creation or in the human heart, but Scripture’s primacy and the darkening of the human mind require that Scripture be the lens to see this revelation. Inverting that relationship is wrong. In other words, Scripture has the final or ultimate authority.

It is possible that Roman Catholics will also have little difficulty with the primacy of Scripture—as the normative point of departure for faith and conduct—even as they should have little difficulty with the primacy of grace and faith. But this does not mean that we are also in agreement about the meaning of primacy. That is properly a subject of ongoing debate.

The primacy of Scripture, the primacy of grace and the primacy of faith are non-negotiable. That is not just characteristic of the Reformation, but all of Christianity. Besides, after 500 years no one should forget that the Reformation was not about separation, but renovation of the one holy catholic church.

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<sup>51</sup> The phrase translates the title of Seakle Greijdanus’ *Schriftbeginselen ter schriftverklaring* (Kampen: Kok, 1946).